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Towards a Bigger Picture: Transatlantic Ekphrasis in William B. Patrick's “The Slave Ship”

*Carl Plasa**

ABSTRACT

David Dabydeen's "Turner" (1994) is well-known as an ekphrastic response to J. M. W. Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon Coming On* (1840) and firmly established as an important achievement in the field of postcolonial Caribbean poetry. While such a status is wholly justified, it is the premise of this essay that the critical privileging of Dabydeen's text as the horizon for *The Slave Ship*'s poetic legacy is not without its drawbacks. The most serious of these is that it has resulted in a certain blindness towards another long and complex ekphrastic poem on Turner's masterpiece that emanates from an American rather than a Caribbean literary context and that was published in the same year as Dabydeen's—William B. Patrick's "The Slave Ship." It is not this essay's purpose to speculate on why "Turner," written by a black Caribbean author, has enjoyed such critical prestige while "The Slave Ship," written by an author who is a white American, has been rendered critically invisible, nor is the concern to adjudicate between the aesthetic merits of the two poems, which would seem to have been composed entirely independently of one another. The aim, rather, is to bring the transatlantic encounter between Patrick's text and Turner's painting into critical view for the first time and demonstrate the ways in which it extends and enriches the current understanding of contemporary ekphrastic poetry that takes the Middle Passage as its subject.

KEYWORDS: William B. Patrick's "The Slave Ship,"
ekphrastic poetry, Turner's *The Slave Ship*;
Zong atrocity, Middle Passage; transatlantic
exchange

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I. Introduction: Turning from “Turner”

The mid-1990s was a particularly dynamic time for Black Atlantic poets reflecting on the historical trauma of the Middle Passage, as evidenced by the appearance of three long works produced within a two-year period: David Dabydeen’s “Turner” (1994), Clarence Major’s “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” (also 1994) and Kwame Dawes’s *Requiem: A Lament for the Dead* (1996). What these works have in common—besides their length, subject-matter and concurrence—is that they are all written using the technique of ekphrasis, the “*verbal representation of visual representation*,” in James A. W. Heffernan’s disarmingly straightforward definition (3). Major’s poem surveys, engages and takes issue with a range of Western images of black subjects from the Renaissance to the abolitionist era, while Dawes’s book-length text is inspired by Tom Feelings’s *The Middle Passage: White Ships / Black Cargo* (1995) and the “story in pictures” (Feelings n. pag.) that it tells. In Dabydeen’s case, by contrast, ekphrastic range is exchanged for depth, as his poem enters into dialogue with art of the early Victorian period and focuses on just one work, J. M. W. Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon Coming On* (1840), more commonly and succinctly known as *The Slave Ship* (Fig. 1).

In an additional contrast to the works by Major and Dawes, Dabydeen’s text has elicited far more critical attention and is now firmly established as an important achievement in the field of postcolonial Caribbean poetry. While there is no doubt that such a status is wholly justified, it is the premise of this essay that the concentration on Dabydeen’s poem as an ekphrastic response to the call of Turner’s masterpiece is not without its drawbacks.¹ The most serious of these is that it has resulted in a certain blindness towards another long and complex ekphrastic poem on Turner’s famous and dramatic picture

¹ For work which reads “Turner” along such ekphrastic lines, see, in particular, Gravendyk, Härting, Slapkauskaitė and Wallart. Dabydeen’s own comments on his poem’s relationship to Turner’s picture are also worth consulting, as they appear in the course of interviews with Eckstein and Raney collected in Macedo 163-72 and 184-97. The interactions between poem and painting, it should be noted, are not always the central focus in readings of “Turner,” with some critics preferring, for example, to emphasize the poem’s intertextual rather than intermedial dimensions, as in Boeninger’s exploration of the text in terms of its negotiation and revision of Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990). For the most recent instance of this critical emphasis, see Plasa, who argues that Dabydeen’s poem can be construed as a work in dialogue not just with Turner’s painting but other non-visual texts, especially William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

that emanates from an American rather than a Caribbean literary context—William B. Patrick’s “The Slave Ship.” By a curious coincidence, this thirteen-page text first appeared in *The Southern Review* in the same year as “Turner” and was subsequently incorporated into Patrick’s *These Upraised Hands* (1995). This collection not only places “The Slave Ship” at its mid-point and uses a repeated line from the text as its title but also bears the image of Turner’s violent seascape on its front cover, creative and editorial decisions which combine, ironically, to advertise the poem’s preeminence within the volume overall, if not within the wider spheres of critical reception and debate.²

It is not this essay’s purpose to speculate on why “Turner,” written by a black Caribbean author, has enjoyed such critical prestige while “The Slave Ship,” written by an author who is a white American, has been rendered critically invisible, nor is the concern to adjudicate between the aesthetic merits of the two texts, which would seem to have been composed entirely independently of one another. The aim, rather, is to bring the transatlantic encounter between Patrick’s text and Turner’s painting into critical view for the first time and demonstrate the ways in which it extends and enriches the current understanding of contemporary ekphrastic poetry that takes the Middle Passage as its subject. In so doing, the essay also serves as a reminder that the institution of the transatlantic slave trade with which both poets deal via Turner is just as much a part of a white European as an African diasporic history.

² The critical oversight of “The Slave Ship” comes to seem further ironic when it is recalled that “Turner” is driven by a desire to retrieve that which is marginal, overlooked or set at naught, transmuting absence into presence, silence into voice. Such a desire is quite typical of other texts, whether poetic or fictional, in which Dabydeen uses ekphrasis as a technique with which to negotiate the visual memory of slavery. In “Dependence, or the Ballad of the Little Black Boy,” the final poem in *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), Dabydeen renarrates Francis Wheatley’s *A Family Group in a Landscape* (c. 1775) in the first-person voice of the silhouetted slave looking in from the left-hand edge of a domestic gathering which includes and excludes him at one and the same time. Similarly, in *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), the personage endowed with new centrality is the young black page occupying the lower right-hand corner of the second Plate in the 1733 series of Hogarthian engravings from which Dabydeen’s novel derives its title. In “Turner” itself, to complete the catalogue of instances, Dabydeen again recovers and subjectifies a peripheral figure. In this case, however, the figure in question, taken from *The Slave Ship*, is not the finely turbaned prostitute’s attendant we find in Hogarth, but an African slave, whose narrative, as Dabydeen puts it, “has been drowned in Turner’s (and other artists’) sea for centuries” (*Turner* ix).

II. Transition on the *Zong*: From “Conduct so Shocking” to “Poetical Language”

Before embarking on a reading of “The Slave Ship,” it is useful briefly to reprise the historical incident widely thought to have provided the catalyst for the painting on which Patrick’s poem (like Dabydeen’s) is based. The incident in question occurred aboard the British slave ship, the *Zong*, in 1781 and is generally regarded as one of the most important episodes in the slave trade’s four-hundred-year history.³

Events began on 18 August, when the *Zong*, captained by Luke Collingwood, set sail from Accra, on the coast of Africa, for Black River, Jamaica, carrying a cargo of some 442 slaves and a crew of seventeen, together with Collingwood’s first mate, James Kelsall and one passenger, Robert Stubbs, erstwhile governor of the slave-fort at Anomabu. Although Collingwood had made several previous slave-trading voyages as ship’s surgeon, this was his first assignment as ship’s master and his inexperience in such a capacity, coupled with his ill-health (which, according to some accounts, even included bouts of delirium), resulted in a state of generalized mismanagement—of the *Zong*’s course, provisions and chain of command alike. By 27-28 November, more than three months into its journey, the *Zong* had lost its bearings: it was at this point sailing away from Jamaica (which it had mistaken for Saint-Domingue, then rival Caribbean territory held by France) and was in a state of distress, with sixty-two African captives already dead and many more struggling with disease and illness. Under the era’s marine insurance law, owners who lost slaves from such causes during the Middle Passage were not eligible to receive financial compensation, but could be so remunerated if it could be proven that their slaves’ deaths were in some way necessary. Aware of this protocol, Collingwood duly ordered the drowning of 132 of the sickest Africans under his charge, dispatching them into the Atlantic in parcels of fifty-four, forty-two and thirty-six across a period of several days beginning on 29 November. The Captain legitimated his actions by claiming that they were carried out in order to protect the

³ According to Baucom, “art historians agree” on the role this incident plays in shaping *The Slave Ship* (268), but, as Slapkauskaite notes, they are “unable to fully substantiate their claims” (318), a point similarly made by McCoubrey (321-22). Whatever the exact truth of the matter, it is abundantly clear that, within the imaginative framework of Patrick’s poem, the *Zong* episode and Turner’s painting are fully interwoven.

slaver's water supplies, which were allegedly running perilously low, a claim later exposed as false. This murderous subterfuge prepared the ground for the *Zong*'s owners (the Liverpool-based Gregson syndicate) to seek indemnities from the ship's underwriters at a rate of £30 *per capita*. In addition to those whom Collingwood deliberately drowned, the final death-toll included a further ten slaves who refused the role of victim allotted them by choosing to drown themselves.

The owners' case eventually came to court on 6 March 1783 at London's Guildhall, where proceedings were attended by an anonymous eyewitness who reported on the trial in a letter addressed "To the Printer of *The Morning Chronicle*" and published in that newspaper some twelve days later. As the letter recounts, "The narrative" of the shipboard massacre "seemed to make every person" present at the hearing "shudder," even as its sensational horrors were evidently insufficient to prevent the "Jury, without going out of Court," from finding against the insurers. This decision (against which the insurers appealed in a motion for a new trial) leaves the letter-writer both scandalized and more broadly fearful for the corrupting effects it is likely to have upon the British nation at large, as it threatens to "sink" even "the most flourishing kingdom in anarchy and ruin" ("To the Printer").

As the letter continues, however, the sense of moral outrage and national anxiety is overtaken by a different mood. Struck by the courage of one of the slaves who ends his suffering in suicide, the letter's author becomes gripped by his own desire for compensation, though this is of a type altogether different from and more refined than that desired by Gregson and company:

I wish some man of feeling and genius would give poetical language to one of those brave fellow's thoughts, whose indignation made him voluntarily share death with his countrymen. . . . With what noble disdain would he animate his sentiments, with what resignation would he consider himself, when plunging into the ocean, as escaping from brutes in human shape, to throw himself on the unsearchable mercy of his Creator. What a tender adieu would he bid his family and country! What a parting look would he cast on a glorious world, on the sun and heavens, disgraced by such a scene. What dreadful imprecations would he utter against such monsters,

and against the barbarous, unfeeling country that sent them out, or wished to profit by their trade. (“To the Printer”)

Here the compensation sought is not pecuniary but imaginative, as the letter-writer longs for “some man of feeling and genius” capable of not only salvaging the desperate “thoughts” of a self-destructive slave but also articulating them in “poetical language.” In one sense, the wish for the advent of a poet who can function as empathetic spokesman for the suicidal slave, who in turn represents his “countrymen,” is something the epistolary author himself fulfils, as his own text fleetingly assumes a suitable elevation of tone and becomes populated with “tender adieu[s],” “parting look[s]” and Biblical evocations of the “unsearchable mercy of [the] Creator.”

As critics have noted, this document is important from a historical perspective, for two reasons. First, as Seymour Drescher points out, it is something of a rarity, being the only account of the trial to have been carried by the London press of the day (576). Secondly, as James Walvin argues, it was to have “profound and unexpected consequences” (104): it drew to light the monstrous truth of the slave trade in a way that was harnessed by prominent antislavery figures, including Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharp, as part of their efforts to bring the barbarous traffic to an end (104-06). Ultimately, indeed, it was a factor in the formation, in 1787, of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, of which Sharp was one of twelve founding members.⁴

What has not been critically observed about the letter, however, is that it also has a literary significance, broadly looking forward to the responses to the *Zong* affair, as it came to be called, that Dabydeen and Patrick have elaborated and which implicitly share the letter-writer’s faith in poetry as a resource for reckoning with atrocity. In contrast to the letter-writer’s own high-flown outburst, those responses are neither direct nor spontaneous, nor, importantly, do they articulate the inner “thoughts” of any of the *Zong*’s suicides (though slave suicide is a recurrent theme in Patrick’s text). Rather, they are mediated by the visual recollection of those who are the *Zong*’s murdered victims, as embodied in *The Slave Ship*, that great work of another

⁴ For a more detailed account of the *Zong* massacre, together with its legal, social and historical significance, see the symposium of articles in *Journal of Legal History* and Walvin. For a useful collocation of legal and other documents pertaining to the *Zong* case and, especially, the insurers’ petition for the second trial (thought never to have taken place), see Lyall 239-374.

“man of feeling and genius.” The question of how Patrick’s poem engages with that painting is the subject of the rest of this essay.

III. Setting the Scene: Conflicting Visions in “The Slave Ship”

As well as being written from a white rather than black perspective, Patrick’s poem offers an approach to *The Slave Ship* quite different from Dabydeen’s, particularly in terms of structure. “Turner” is a posthumous utterance, spoken by the drowned slave whom Dabydeen magically rescues and revives from the tumult of the artist’s Atlantic—the “salt splash burning [his] eyes / Awake” (“Turner” 11)—but Patrick’s text has a more intricate arrangement, juxtaposing two figures who could hardly be further apart from one another—historically, geographically, ideologically and linguistically.

The first of these, located at the start of the abolitionist era, is an officer of the Royal Navy whose three-year sojourn in Africa affords him direct experience of the slave trade. Although he does not personally participate in or profit from it financially, the naval officer firmly supports the institution, outlining his observations and opinions in a letter, addressed to a “dear friend” (Patrick 51) domiciled in England, that takes up just eighty-five of the poem’s 376 lines—less than a quarter of the space available. The second and textually dominant figure of “The Slave Ship,” by contrast, is situated in the end-of-millennium period when the poem was published and spends his time exploring and commenting on Turner’s painting as he gazes at it in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where it is currently housed. Thus cast in the role of art-critic or art-expert, he adds another chapter to the chequered history of the reviews *The Slave Ship* has stimulated ever since it was first exhibited at London’s Royal Academy in 1840. The discourses of these two figures are each split into six sections presented alternately, with the art-critic interrupting the naval officer and vice versa in a series of stops and starts that spans the historical divide between them. This patterning creates a sense of textual discontinuity commensurate with the scene of violent bodily disintegration Turner’s painting so powerfully sets forth.

Alongside the historical and geographical differences between naval officer and art-critic, there are ideological conflicts too, with the latter disturbed and repelled by an institution the former condones. This radical antipathy has its curious and striking correlate in the different types of

grammatical dispensation characterizing the two figures' respective contributions to the text. In the shorter epistolary pro-slave trade parts of the poem belonging to the naval officer, punctuation is conventional and syntax unremarkable and no sentences go beyond six lines in length, with the majority not exceeding three. This preferred pattern of bite-sized grammatical units lends an air of order to these parts of the poem and is designed to make the buying and selling of slaves seem innocuous and banal—something that passes without notice—while also being tailored to the “childish heart” (Patrick 51) the naval figure condescendingly ascribes to his (probably female) correspondent. In the anti-slave trade ekphrasis that takes up the lion's share of the poem, conversely, the laws of grammar are all but abandoned: all commas and full stops take flight, together with other routine marks of punctuation, such that it is only possible to identify where sentences begin and end by virtue of the capitalized words that appear sporadically at the start of particular lines. These devices work as improvised orientation-points for an otherwise potentially flummoxed reader, just as italics are used to demarcate the places where a voice other than that of the art-critic occasionally enters the text. Such a disturbance of grammatical norms can be read as a kind of linguistic signature for the poem's art-expert, while also providing an empathetic textual acknowledgement of the visual disorder that marks *The Slave Ship*. At the same time, it seems well-suited to the dystopian value-system governing the *Zong*, where the act of jettisoning slaves is indistinguishable from the discarding of a civilized morality.

As the allocation of textual space implies, Patrick's poem is much more engaged by the art-critic's fluid commentary than the slavish orthodoxies of thought and expression that regulate the naval officer's letter and this imaginative weighting is reflected accordingly in the ensuing discussion. This begins with a brief overview of the epistolary sections of the poem, before going on to a much more detailed analysis of its more challenging and substantial ekphrastic elements.

IV. African Apologia

As the poem's headnote indicates, the letter composed by the officer-figure of “The Slave Ship” is not wholly of Patrick's own invention but a pastiche of an archival document, in the relatively obscure shape of

Lieutenant John Matthews's *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, on the Coast of Africa* (1788) and it works, like the colonial memoir it recalls, to endorse the slave trading "methods" (Patrick 51) used by "European coastal / dealers" (56), extolling them as providential.⁵ Because they are "much less severe / than the natives' own" benighted system of "slavery" (51), the letter claims, such methods leave the Africans whom their "greedy" "tribal kings" (56) sell to white traders in a condition that is "in the end, / . . . more fortunate than most comprehend" (51).

Along with recalling Matthews, the naval figure in "The Slave Ship" might remind us of the anonymous reporter at the *Zong* trial, who is also the author of an eyewitness account, but such a resemblance is momentary and superficial, given the profound degree to which they are at odds with one another with regard to the slave trade's moral status. More pertinently, the poem's officer-figure is eventually and ironically revealed also to have been all along at odds with the close acquaintance to whom he writes. This implicit tension becomes explicit in the closing paragraph of the officer's letter, in which he expresses a sarcastic gratitude for the anti-slave trade "essays" (Patrick 61) his friend has thoughtfully sent him and which are the original stimulus to what the officer calls his "last response" (51): "I daresay you favor the brand of writer / who harps on the grave inhumanity / of our Slave Trade, while summering near Dover" (61), he testily remarks, using a trope that, in this context, has an unsettling connotation. By selecting the term "brand," the officer obliquely signals his animosity towards the new-fangled abolitionist texts the friend so pointedly prefers to read. He perhaps even hints at an exasperated desire to subject those texts' vacationing authors to the same suffering as is inflicted upon the slaves for whom they campaign and which he has regularly observed with such cool detachment during his tropical posting: "When sales are through, buyers mark the [slaves] / they own, scalding each owner's unique mark / into chests or backs with an incandescent iron" (59).

In a final twist, it could even be said that the officer is at odds with himself, as his argument is marred by internal contradiction. In the same valedictory paragraph, he gruffly complains that "slaves" are no better than "beasts" (Patrick 61)—"links in Nature's / chain, at best" (61-62)—and that

⁵ The engagement with the archive of colonial history that Patrick's use of this particular source represents is also evident in the two poems appearing in *These Upraised Hands* on either side of "The Slave Ship"—"In the New World" (37-50) and "The Island of Birds" (64-71).

the slave trade “save[s] these creatures from certain death in their [own] country” (62). Yet such claims do not pass muster when set against earlier disclosures which suggest that induction into the slave trade, far from enabling captured Africans to avoid death, in fact makes such a fate more likely:

Then [the slavers] beat [the slaves] toward the beach
with hide whips and most, glimpsing an ocean
for the first time, will beseech
the slavers to kill them there, or will clutch
howling at the sand until the native Krumen
drag them to the transport boats. Inasmuch
as the slaves think whites are new kings, who would sell
them to cannibals, they will jump
to waiting sharks or, with their chains, try to strangle
themselves. Some captains report that Ibos
have hanged themselves at their first sight of Barbados. (59)

V. In and out of the Frame: “The Slave Ship” as Augmented Ekphrasis

As noted earlier, punctuation is reduced to a vestigial presence in the poem’s six ekphrastic sections, but reappears as an ingenious if equally residual part of the picture they describe. In the second section, for example, the art-critic at one point trains his eye upon the mysteriously buoyant shackles located in the middle foreground of *The Slave Ship* and likens the “disembodied / iron loops” he beholds there to “magenta question marks” (Patrick 54).

In being drawn to these dubious shackles “that float . . . / for no reason / in the / quiet center” (Patrick 54) of Turner’s painting, the picture’s late twentieth-century respondent follows *The Slave Ship*’s nineteenth-century reviewers in both Britain and America, several of whom also directed attention to these particular and peculiar items, which they regarded, like the painting as a whole, as artistically questionable—and derisively so at that. One of the first to note and mock these fetters as anomalous was William Makepeace Thackeray, after viewing Turner’s painting on its Academy debut. Writing in *Fraser’s Magazine* for June 1840 under the improbable soubriquet

of Michael Angelo Titmarsh, Thackeray identifies these “chains that will not sink” as part of a painting that itself seems to float irresolutely somewhere between the “sublime” and the “ridiculous,” leading him to exclaim: “Ye gods, what a ‘middle passage!’” (731). Mark Twain, satirizing *The Slave Ship in A Tramp Aboard*, some eight years after the work was sold to John Taylor Johnston and brought to America, similarly dismisses “The most of the picture” as a “manifest impossibility,” partly supporting his argument by reference, once again, to those “iron cable-chains.” These, as the errant Turner must surely know, belong with other “unfloatable things” and not atop a sea that looks like “glaring yellow mud” (Twain 157).⁶

For the anonymous reviewer writing in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in September 1840, some three months on from Thackeray, *The Slave Ship* is a fanciful achievement too: it is a “dream of the colour pots” and an “unaccountable performance” “out of all rule and measure” and the “floating” chains themselves are “quite miraculous” (“Royal Academy Exhibition” 380). Yet even as this reviewer’s interpretation of these objects is in line with that of Thackeray and Twain, he ends his commentary by suggesting a more sympathetic reading, in which the unsinkable chains assume a tentative symbolic value. Is Turner’s treatment of these things that “water wouldn’t swallow” intended to be “poetical,” the reviewer wonders—a metaphor, in other words, for how the memory of slavery remains difficult to digest and simply “won’t go down” (380).

This symbolic interpretation of what the contributor to *Blackwood's* calls “slavery’s chains” (“Royal Academy Exhibition” 380) implies a potential for serious reflection on the historical substance of Turner’s painting, but it should be clear from the foregoing examples that nineteenth-century reviewers were primarily interested in the technical flaws of the work and that

⁶ The complicated sequence of events resulting in the sale of *The Slave Ship* (which Ruskin’s father originally purchased for his son as a New Year’s gift in 1844) is documented in May 156-85. May also devotes some space to the painting’s American reception—which largely mirrors the puzzlement and mockery of the earlier British response—but for more detail see Walker and McCoubrey 349-52. Although Twain’s low opinion of *The Slave Ship* did not change, it should be seen in the context of a larger appreciation of Turner’s almost supernatural artistic power, which seems to hold him captive. As Twain comments, in his own footnote to his encounter with the painting: “Months after this was written, I happened into the National Gallery in London, and soon became so fascinated with the Turner pictures that I could hardly get away from the place. I went there often, afterward, meaning to see the rest of the gallery, but the Turner spell was too strong; it could not be shaken off. However, the Turners which attracted me most did not remind me of the *Slave Ship*” (158).

it was these, rather than *The Slave Ship*'s troubling content, that defined the source of their outrage. The emphasis on artistic technique rather than the pressing matter of history is also evident in the most famous nineteenth-century assessment of the picture, formulated by John Ruskin in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843). Although Ruskin extravagantly praises rather than condemns Turner's artistry, his own ekphrastic account of *The Slave Ship* has nonetheless been considered problematic for that very reason—at least from a postcolonial perspective. As Dabydeen argues, Ruskin's obsession with technique leaves little space for him to address the painting's subject—the “shackling and drowning of Africans” (*Turner* ix)—such that it can only be fleetingly acknowledged in a footnote: “She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses” (Ruskin 572). For Dabydeen, that is, Ruskin's investment in technique is a strategy of deflection and distraction, a means of seeing one thing in order not to see something else and the same may also be the case for the painting's other (less enthusiastic) reviewers.⁷

By contrast, no one could accuse the art-critic in Patrick's poem of trying to block out the violent realities of Turner's painting—at first glance, at least. He plunges into them with the very first words he utters in the text, dragging the reader with him:

These upraised hands
and this one leg
upside down in the right foreground
the one exposed
mid-thigh to toe
as it slides down surrounded
by white fish
with bulging black eyes
and perfect hunger in their eager
upturned tails
these few extremities
easily mistaken for fish or waves

⁷ While Dabydeen's critique of Ruskin's reading of *The Slave Ship* has exerted a strong influence on numerous critics, it has also been challenged, most notably by Frost, who sees Ruskin's response as in fact morally engaged by the picture's subject-matter rather than blind to it. See Frost 382-86.

and caught
 for this one instant
 between the onrushing diagonal rain
 and the torrential sea
 that accepts
 everyone
 even this ship on the left
 with its blood-red empty masts
 tipping back
 these evanescent strokes
 are people
 already almost completely under
 the burnt umber and white-lead foam
 flecked with hovering gulls
 (52)

Here the death-laden “near sea” from which Ruskin so carefully distances himself by consigning it to the safe haven of his footnote is brought back into close-up, with the focus falling on the slaves’ “extremities”—a word well-chosen in the light of their extreme predicament.

This opening excerpt from the first segment of the art-critic’s discourse reverses the privileging of technique over content defining nineteenth-century responses to *The Slave Ship*, but possesses technical features of its own (aside from the down-swirling syntax) that are worthy of comment and designed to reflect rather than avoid the atrocious scene Turner depicts. If the poem’s figuration of the “iron loops” as “question marks” briefly textualizes Turner’s image, so here Patrick’s text assumes a more permanent visual quality: its lines are organized in a mutually centred pattern and varied in length in such a way as to approximate the shape of that topsy-turvy leg, as it “slides down” into Turner’s “torrential sea,” its inflated size causing the “eyes” of the “fish” encircling it to become gleefully enlarged in response, as they “bulg[e]” with surprise and delight.

Perhaps what is most notable about these lines, however, is that while they may be centred relative to one another, they are manifestly off-centre relative to the page on which they are printed in the original, giving the appearance of having been pulled towards the page’s right, with the three

longest lines in fact stretching far enough to touch the margin. This typographical displacement (or *slippage*, if the pun can be borne) occurs across all the ekphrastic segments of the poem and serves as a concrete reminder of the art-critic's sympathy towards the black figure in the early stages of being devoured by that company of monstrous fish crowding into the "right foreground" of Turner's canvas. It also operates as a visual articulation of his ideological distance from the naval officer, whose pro-slave trade letter is delivered, throughout the poem, in verse conventionally aligned with the margin on the page's left.

The lines just cited clearly demonstrate that the art-critic in Patrick's poem is much more willing and able than his nineteenth-century predecessors to face and embrace the terrible history *The Slave Ship* recollects, yet, as a closer look at his portions of the poem reveals, the situation is not quite as straightforward as that, as he too is at times driven to disavow the truth of what he sees. Such a denial is evident, for example, in the contradictory trajectories involved in his description of that flamboyantly protrusive object, the slave's leg: even as the art-critic attests to how the limb is descending into the Atlantic, his eye traces a line that moves in the opposite direction, from "mid-thigh to toe." Similarly, although he begins his account of *The Slave Ship* by immediately confronting the reader with a vision of the flotsam and jetsam of the slaves' body-parts, it is not until much later that this anatomical detritus is resolved into the form of "people," as if he cannot countenance the drastic depersonalization to which the slave trade reduces its victims.

Considered in this light, it would appear that the art-critic has a little more in common with *The Slave Ship*'s earlier reviewers than we might at first have supposed, an impression strengthened when his own recurrent emphasis on Turner's painterly techniques is taken into account. Before the slaves' randomized and broken bodies emerge as "people," for example, they are, after all, just "evanescent strokes" administered by the painter's brush, just as the "foam" that has almost submerged them is an effect compounded from "burnt umber" and "white-lead." Later on in the poem, the "waves" of Turner's sea are described, comparably, in terms of the technique that produces them—they have been "knife-smoothed" (Patrick 54) by the artist—and "painting" itself is defined, later still, as an abstract rather than a representational pursuit: "a continuous inquiry / into relationships / between form / light / [and] color" (60). It is as if, in these textual moments, the

art-critic of “The Slave Ship” raises up his own metaphorical hands against Turner’s picture in a bid to shield himself from its terrifying visual assault.

Even at such points, however, the story *The Slave Ship* wants to tell cannot be drowned out, demanding recognition, appropriately enough, in linguistic bits and pieces. The “white-lead” that is part of the poem’s description of Turner’s “foam” is borrowed directly from Thackeray (“Yonder is the slaver rocking in the midst of a flashing foam of white-lead” [731]), while “burnt umber” echoes Ruskin, for whom Turner’s Atlantic is “encumbered with corpses” (*italics added*). Finally, as the poem concedes, in a reversal of its own argument, the seemingly nonrepresentational interplay between painting’s internal elements—form, light and colour—cannot avoid “suggest[ing] / . . . / fragments of sky ship sea or human body” (Patrick 60).

As he strives to come to terms with these miscellaneous “fragments,” the art-critic also mixes them with his own visions, augmenting what is commonly visible to the naked eye in Turner’s painting with sights that are not—and even imagining voices and sounds that, by definition, cannot be apprehended by the act of looking. In so doing, he starts to draw his silent companion (and the reader) back into the time before the “one instant” the painting captures—that of “sunset on the Atlantic” (Ruskin 571)—endowing the slaves on the point of disappearing into Turner’s ocean with a short history just as oppressive as their imperilled and crepuscular present. This process begins in the lines that complete the first part of the art-critic’s ekphrasis:

These bodies
 you cannot see
 were chained sideways
 ass to face
 alive or dead this morning
 in the slippery hold you also won’t see here
 The blood
 squeezed from their bodies
 steamed up through
 gratings
 and became this swollen sky
 that sweeps up here
 to the left

upper corner
 Before the first ominous red of morning
 a small boy
 who dreamed of the moon
 over his empty village
 woke up
 crying
Kickeraboo Kickeraboo
 We are dying
 We are dying

(52-53)

As his insistent claims—“you cannot see” and “you also won’t see”—would suggest, the art-critic seems privileged (or burdened) with a capacity for imaginative vision that is lacking in his less gifted companion, who can only “see” the “blood / squeezed from [the slaves’] bodies” when it is viscerally and vicariously transformed into the paint on Turner’s canvas. Yet in one sense, the fearful vision into which the art-critic voyages is not a private one somehow unique to him, since the “bodies” he claims to see “chained sideways” in the “hold” recall those featured in the well-known diagram of the Liverpool slave ship, the *Brooks* (Fig. 2). This print was created in 1788 as part of the abolitionist campaign and rapidly became a kind of public property, appearing, in different versions, on both sides of the Atlantic, in pamphlets, books and newspapers, as well as on posters put up in taverns and coffee houses.⁸

But if it is the image of the *Brooks* that informs the art-critic’s vision in the first six lines of this passage, it is eyewitness accounts of conditions aboard that iconic slaver that become important in the last nine, as the vision first shifts to the figure of the “small boy,” “dream[ing] of the moon / over his empty village” and then takes on a hauntingly auditory element, as the moonstruck child awakens into the nightmare of his overcrowded Atlantic dungeon. Here the boy’s cry of “*Kickeraboo Kickeraboo*,” translated by the art-critic as “We are dying / We are dying,” repeats not only itself but also the testimony of Thomas Trotter, surgeon aboard the *Brooks* during one of its

⁸ For a thorough analysis of the evolution of the image of the *Brooks* and the part it played during the political struggles of the abolitionist era, see Rediker 308-42.

voyages in 1783. Appalled by the black suffering he witnessed on this trip, Trotter became a fervent abolitionist and gave an account of his experiences before a Parliamentary Select Committee, set up in 1790 to gather information about the slave trade. In the course of this statement, Trotter recalls how, during the voyage, he had:

seen the slaves drawing their breath with all those laborious and anxious efforts for life, which is observed [sic] in expiring animals, subjected by experiment to foul air, or in the exhausted receiver of an air pump; [and] also seen them, when the tarpawlings [sic] have inadvertently been thrown over the gratings, attempting to heave them up, crying out, “Kickeraboo, kickeraboo,” i.e. “We are dying.” (*Abridgment* 37)

The strange word that so catches Trotter’s ear and echoes in Patrick’s poem (sometimes also spelt with an “a” as “kickeraboo”) is “presumed to be a black pronunciation of the phrase ‘kick the bucket’” (Green 317). The word appears in fledgling traditions of blackface minstrelsy, as, for example, in a song composed and originally published by the theatre manager and writer, Charles Dibdin the Younger, in his *Christmas Gambols*, just five years after Trotter gave his evidence. This is the song’s first verse, as reproduced in George Hogarth’s *The Songs of Charles Dibdin* (1848):

Poor negro say one ting—you no take offence,
Black and white be one colour a hundred years hence;
For when massa Death kick him into the grave,
He no spare negro, buckra, nor massa, nor slave.
Then dance, and then sing, and the banjer thrum thrum,
He foolish to tink what to-morrow may come;
Lily laugh and be fat, do best ting you can do,—
Time enough to be sad when you kickeraboo. (113-14)

As W. T. Lhamon, Jr. points out, this song provides “an early instance of the slave’s meditation on the master’s death, and its meaning. . . . [It] appeared many times in Atlantic songsters” (486).

Together with providing a helpful gloss on Dibdin’s song, Lhamon’s

brief comments can be brought usefully to bear on the significance of “Kickeraboo” as it features in the Atlantic soundscape that Patrick’s text evokes.⁹ Although the word sounds plaintive and despairing enough at first (as it does in Trotter’s report), Dibdin’s song suggests that it is not just a slaves’ lament for their own mortality, but a celebratory recognition of how, in the end, both slave and master, “negro” and “buckra,” are subject to the higher power of “massa Death,” who blindly overrides the hierarchical differences created by the artifice of race. Such a reading expands the first-person plural of “We are dying,” transforming it into an unsegregated grammatical “grave” which can happily accommodate “white” as well as “Black” and, like Turner’s sea, “accepts / everyone.”

In the second and longest section of his commentary on *The Slave Ship*, the art-critic’s temporal retreat from the murderous Atlantic sunset depicted in Turner’s painting extends beyond the fateful morning on which the boy’s cry is heard to encompass earlier phases in his voyage. In such periods, the ship on which the boy is captive follows the grim rhythms of grim routines, starting by bringing its slaves up from hold to deck:

Most mornings
they were danced on deck
in ankle chains
like this one in the right foreground
still attached
to flesh
.....
Some would order the men in irons up
Jump
some would shout
or
move your feet
though those with swollen ankles
might bleed to death
from dancing

⁹ As Danielle Skeeahan argues, such a “soundscape” is composed not only from the sounds made by slaves’ voices (and bodies) but also “the material conditions of their imprisonment—instruments of labor, chains, and the ship itself.” As well as necessarily eluding the written record of the slave trade, it is invariably linked, she argues, to slaves’ strategies of resistance to their oppression.

and the sailor with the cat-o'-nine-tails
 be flogged then
 A toothless woman might bang
 an upturned kettle
 and the fool who signed on at Liverpool
 to play bagpipes
 on the Guinea slaver
 for a quarter-percent share
 might try a reel
 to make the crew forget what they all do
 as the dancers
 sing their own words for
 sorrow
 for child

.....

and the sea would sing
 on quieter mornings
 to the dancers
 silently
 across these purple waves
Come home
I am the way home
Come home

(54-55)

The ritual of “Dancing the slave” (Fabre 36) that these lines dramatize (and whose passive construction tells its own story of compulsion) is widely documented in eyewitness reports on the Middle Passage.¹⁰ As Geneviève Fabre explains, the official purpose of this euphemistic measure was to provide African captives with exercise after the cramped conditions they would have endured in the hold overnight, although, as she notes, it is, in effect, just “another kind of confinement” (35) and part, moreover, of a “deliberate scheme to ensure subordination by destroying former practices, to

¹⁰ These include the account by Trotter, which notes that, although the practice is “general in the trade,” it was only “used” on the *Brooks* when “exercise became absolutely necessary for [slaves’] health” (*Abridgment* 38).

curb any attempt at recovering freedom of movement, action, or thought” (36).

In addition to creating a torturesome disciplinary theatre for slaves’ physical activity, these dance-routines provided an important means of entertaining the crew, to such an extent indeed that, to cite Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, on whom Patrick here directly draws, “Slaving captains . . . advertised for ‘A person that can play on the Bagpipes, for a Guinea ship’” (114). In Patrick’s poem, however, the “slave ship dance” (Fabre 34)—complete with that “upturned kettle” that Patrick also borrows from Mannix and Cowley—is not just a form of amusement for bored sailors, but also carries out a collective psychological function. Specifically, it enables them briefly “to forget what they all do,” a phrase whose catch-all imprecision seems to enact the very oblivion to which it refers, effacing, in particular, the sexual violation perpetrated upon female slaves—“the women they wanted” (Patrick 54)—which was also a routine part of the slave trade.¹¹ For the “dancers” themselves, conversely, it is recollection rather than forgetting that is paramount, as the slaves combine enforced movement with vocal expression, “sing[ing] their own words for / sorrow / for child” as a way of preserving the memory of the land from which they have been exiled.

As Fabre further explains, in these shipboard rituals, “the basic principles of many performances to come were set: the blending and interplay of dance, song, and music; the call-and-response pattern between dance and music, between voice and instrument, body and song, and mostly between leader-caller and the assembly of dancers” (40). Yet here that pattern is reversed, as it is the dancers brought together on the deck who launch the initial call and the solitary sea that hearkens to and answers their sorrow songs with its seductive “*Come home . . . Come home.*” Such a Siren-like appeal is one some slaves were all too willing to answer, choosing (like the ten on the *Zong*) to commit suicide not only in order both to end their suffering and regain control over their bodies but also in the belief that such an act would secure a jubilant return to Africa (Piersen 151). From this perspective, the crew’s command to “*Jump*” takes on a new and ironic resonance, unwittingly

¹¹ This is an aspect of the Middle Passage that is itself recognized in *The Slave Ship*. As Dabydeen observes, the upended slave featured “in the right foreground” of Turner’s picture is female and the fish that congregate around her are male: “sexual, phallic, monstrous” (Macedo 194). For other readings of Turner’s painting sensitive to the slave’s female identity see Costello 209, May 112 and McCoubrey 344-45.

sounding less like a dance-instruction than a more abrupt and abrasive version of the sea's homecoming chant.¹²

The third and fourth ekphrastic sections of "The Slave Ship" switch the focus back to the morning immediately preceding the massacre Turner's painting depicts, while at the same time developing the suicidal theme by connecting it to that of bodily consumption. In section three, the poem also makes a spatial return from the dancing deck to the "slippery hold," following the slave ship's enigmatic "surgeon" as he is "sent down / amidships" (Patrick 56) to fulfil his daily medical programme. This infernal descent into "heat / [and] noxious vapors," "blood and mucous," prompts the surgeon to "[remember] / a slaughterhouse / he had worked in as a boy" (57), even as it is itself an intertextual recollection of *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (1788), written by Alexander Falconbridge, who, like Trotter, was a slave ship surgeon turned abolitionist. But as well as recalling this text—an important source for these middle sequences of the art-critic's discourse, in particular—"The Slave Ship" significantly revises it: written under the auspices of the abolitionists, Falconbridge's *Account* is sympathetically disposed to his African charges, describing them as "poor sufferers" (28) and regretfully conceding that "[a]lmost the only means by which [a] surgeon can render himself useful to the slaves, is, by seeing that their food is properly cooked, and distributed among them" (29). In Patrick's poem, however, the scene is very different, as the surgeon "force-feed[s]" the slaves, starting with the "tallest men," assisted in his endeavours by "Two cutlass-armed sailors" (56). These menacing if ambiguous figures—armed with cutlasses or with cutlasses for arms?—thrust "moldy plantains / awash in palm oil / or mashed yams filled with maggots / into whatever could still move / but resisted / eating" (56-57).

Whether the surgeon performs his actions willingly or under duress is unclear, but, either way, they end in irony when he begins to suffer the ill-effects of the insanitary atmosphere to which his duties expose him: "Just before / the surgeon . . . fainted / by the ladder / and had to be dragged up / the

¹² The sailors' rough command perhaps also carries an echo of "Jump Jim Crow," a blackface song-and-dance routine whose composition is credited to Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice in the late 1820s. As Olson notes, Rice's choreography for this act "borrowed heavily from African American dancing" and this was a feature that "distinguished [it] from previous blackface routines and probably accounted for [the] act's great popularity," on both sides of the Atlantic. It is thus, as Olson adds, an "early example of the exploitation of African American culture by Anglo American popular entertainers" (399).

slave closest / bit into his foot and held on so hard / a toe came away” (Patrick 57). Yet if the surgeon here becomes an object of consumption and dismemberment for the slaves who otherwise will not eat, the irony of the irony is that they themselves are destined to be devoured piecemeal by the pop-eyed fish that swish towards us much earlier, with “perfect hunger in their eager / upturned tails.”

In the course of his observations on slaves’ diet, Falconbridge addresses the claim, made in “favour of the captains in this trade, that the sick slaves are usually fed from their tables,” but dismisses it by pointing out that the typical number ill at any one time is far too great to make such a custom practicable, even were “a captain *disposed*” to adopt it, stating that just “Two or three perhaps may be fed” (29) in this way. This latter remark provides the cue for the grotesque breakfast laid out before the reader in the short fourth instalment of the art-critic’s ekphrasis, in which Collingwood, previously introduced to us as simply “the Captain” (Patrick 54), is now properly named, along with his first mate, Kelsall:

On this morning
Collingwood is awake
sitting at his carved table
easing pork chops down with English brandy
Two slaves
a woman
he remembers giving beads to afterwards
and a strong Fulani
with a nose broken the first day out
for trying suicide
both weak
from dysentery or scurvy
bound to chairs
are being fed from the Captain’s table
Note this
he is saying to Kelsall
as a sailor
drains a tankard of rum into the man’s mouth
held open

with a pair of hot tongs
Jamaican rum
 Collingwood goes on
what we reserve for dashing Susu kings
Nothing
is too good
for our guests on the Zong
 (58-59)

In this vignette, Collingwood's homely ability to "eas[e] pork chops down with English brandy" sets him in stark opposition to the "strong Fulani," who continues the quest for his own death (begun "the first day out") by refusing to drink, such that his "mouth" has to be kept open by "a pair of hot tongs" while "*Jamaican rum*" is "drain[ed]" into it—a coercive scenario similar to one sketched out in Falconbridge, where "coals of fire, glowing hot" are "put on a shovel, and placed so near [slaves'] lips, as to scorch and burn them" (23). The broken-nosed Fulani's resistance to the rum that is offered him is significant as the sign of a spirit that is precisely unbroken, but accrues additional meaning given the role the beverage plays in sustaining the transatlantic economy: manufactured as a by-product of slave-grown sugar on the plantations of the Caribbean, rum finds its way to the African coast, where it is used, as Collingwood tells us, for the purpose of "*dashing Susu kings*," who in turn furnish more slaves for the plantation, as the cycle of supply and demand perpetuates itself.

In each of the four ekphrastic sections considered so far, the art-critic exhibits an imaginative ability to enter narrative worlds located beyond the picture's immediate temporal frame that his silent auditor cannot emulate—watching the slaves being "danced on deck," following the surgeon into the carceral spaces of the ship's hold and observing Collingwood at his macabre breakfast, where even the "carved table" appears to be a victim of violence (albeit an aesthetic one). In the penultimate part of his discourse, however, the art-critic returns to the time of the painting itself, but only in order, once again, to veer off towards the things that are "not shown" in the picture and may or not in fact be present at all amid the deliberate indistinctness of Turner's "mist and vapor and symbolic blood" (Patrick 60). The most significant of these invisible presences are the slaves gathered for

jettison from the ship: “somewhere in here then / perhaps / in a huddled line / starting at the stern rail / and coiling along the foam-battered / starboard side / are what remain of / 135 pairs / of open eyes / we have simply not found yet” (61).¹³ Given their starboard positioning, it is difficult to see how these remaining “eyes” could ever be reached by any means other than the vehicle of imaginative surmise, but what is noticeable here is how, though “open,” the eyes do their best to avoid the sights around, or rather beneath them. They “try not to notice / the swirling vortical curves / waiting below,” just as, in a synaesthetic shift quite typical of the art-critic’s discourse from here on, they “try” also “not to hear / the half-finished / screams” of their companions as they are “swallowed up in frenzied splashing” (61).

As the art-critic moves into the final section of his discourse, his increasing concern, by contrast, is not to supplement what can be seen in Turner’s painting with his own visionary or speculative flights but, in another approach, to transform it. Addressing his companion and focusing squarely on the visible, he declares:

What you can see here
is the dream
beginning
the dream of the living
left on board
the ship

.....

You can see
these upraised hands
straining still
in the vaporous air and ochre light
leaving one final sign
Look
there is nothing hidden now

¹³ In setting the number of the drowned at 135, Patrick adds three victims to the more usually cited but not necessarily more accurate figure of 132, which itself conflicts dramatically with the figure of “one hundred and fifty . . . negro slaves” (Lyll 242) given during the King’s Bench hearings, held in May 1783, to consider the insurers’ request for the retrial. This deadly uncertainty in the mathematics of the archive is compounded by the fact that “some time after the ship arrived in Jamaica in December 1781, the *Zong*’s logbook went missing” (Walvin 140).

Look
 they are waving
 calling
 to the ones
 left listening on deck
 or floating in the dark hold
 They are waving
 to the gathering mist of jib
 and skewed masts
 reeling off sideways
 They are waving
 to Collingwood and Kelsall
Go ahead
 these hands say
cross into the white foam of your future
Go ahead
you will be left with
yourselves
and the full memory of our eyes
burning
in all of our
children's
eyes
 They are waving
 to us
 They are waving
 as they start home
 (62-63)

As much as they look back to the beginning of the art-critic's observations on *The Slave Ship*, "these upraised hands" that wave and call in the selfsame synaesthetic gesture resonate also with the evocation of the singing sea at the end of the poem's second ekphrastic fragment, echoing the watery inducement to the dancing slaves to "*Come home*" via the bittersweet routes of suicide. Yet the critical difference is that the hand-waving slaves in Turner's sea have not heroically willed or chosen their own demise but, if not dead already, are

dying as a result of having been thrown overboard, as the full title of the painting reminds us. The art-critic claims “there is nothing hidden now,” but the opposite is the case, as his reading of the “final sign” left by the gesticulating slaves works to mask the atrocious truth of Turner’s painting. That truth is itself underwritten by the manuscript-verse Turner attached to his picture when it first went on display. Here the artist-cum-poet’s lines ironically link the hands in the sea with those of the sailors on board the ship, themselves “straining” to secure the vessel against destruction:

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
 Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
 Declare the Typhon’s coming.
 Before it sweep your decks, throw overboard
 The dead and dying—ne’er heed their chains.
 Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
 Where is thy market now?
 (qtd. in Ziff 341)

In reading the slaves’ hands in the tendentious way he does, the art-critic aligns himself with other evasive figures, from the slaves not-yet-jettisoned to the historically unanchored Ruskin. Equally, though, the vigour with which he asserts the veracity of his own reading, with his “What you can see here,” “You can see” and double “Look,” lends him a certain resemblance to the naval officer from the poem’s epistolary sections, similarly bent upon imposing his pro-slave trade views upon his “dear” but sceptical “friend.” Ultimately, though, it would appear that the art-critic himself is unpersuaded by his own interpretative sleight-of-hand—the hermeneutic transformation of Turner’s painting that he attempts—describing it, after all, as a “dream” and even attributing it not to himself but to the “living / left on board / the ship.” The dream in the sense of the ideal (in this case, a triumphant return to Africa) is also a dream in the sense that it is an illusion, a death-wish, or, to use the terms of Turner’s verse, a pathetic and “fallacious Hope.”

VI. Conclusion: Looking beyond “The Slave Ship”

Just as the art-critic urges his companion, in this flurry of departures and

farewells, to “Look” at and interpret the slaves’ “hands” before they vanish altogether, so this essay concludes by proposing that looking at “The Slave Ship”—a poem currently hovering on the verge of its own critical extinction—is a valuable project. This is so not only in terms of what such a project tells us about the text itself but also with regard to how recognition of Patrick’s poem helps us circumvent the prevailing critical assumption that Dabydeen’s “Turner” is the only poetic work in which the legacy of *The Slave Ship* lives on. Study of “The Slave Ship” is of still wider benefit and significance when the relative infrequency with which contemporary white writers have tackled the subject of the Middle Passage (ekphrastically or otherwise) is borne in mind.¹⁴

Yet to posit the somewhat daring and unusual adventure of Patrick’s poem as a new horizon or resting-place for the intermedial legacy of Turner’s *The Slave Ship* is inadequate. It would, in short, only repeat in different form the restriction the essay sets out to overcome, screening off other and more recent poetic engagements with Turner’s enthralling vision that have to date gone all but unnoticed. The most critically rewarding of these occur in the shape of two much shorter texts, Douglas Kearney’s “SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)” (2009) and R. T. Smith’s “Turner’s *Slave Ship*” (2014).¹⁵ While both texts lie well beyond the scope of this essay, they are certainly worth noting as markers of the future direction in which the critical inquiry into *The Slave Ship*’s translation from visual to poetic forms might develop, leading us beyond Patrick’s poem in the same way as the latter leads us beyond Dabydeen’s. For the moment, however, all four texts need only be drawn together and affirmed as testament to the imaginative resources that come into play when poetry and art encounter one another in the baleful waters of the Middle Passage.

¹⁴ The key exception to this pattern, in the decade when Patrick’s poem appeared, is, of course, Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* (1992), an epically scaled historical novel which is itself inspired by the story of the *Zong*.

¹⁵ While critical ink is yet to be expended on Smith’s poem, Kearney’s text has been discussed by Shockley (796-806). Although she compares this poem with the more sustained (and radical) experimentation of Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), Shockley does not go so far as to read it ekphrastically, even as Kearney himself has suggested both its affinities with the ekphrastic genre and its recourse to a visual poetics. See “MAST,” Kearney’s blogpost for 24 January 2011. Kearney does not name *The Slave Ship* as a source or stimulus for “SWIMCHANT,” but there are many connections between poem and painting.

Figures



Fig. 1: J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon Coming On* (1840)

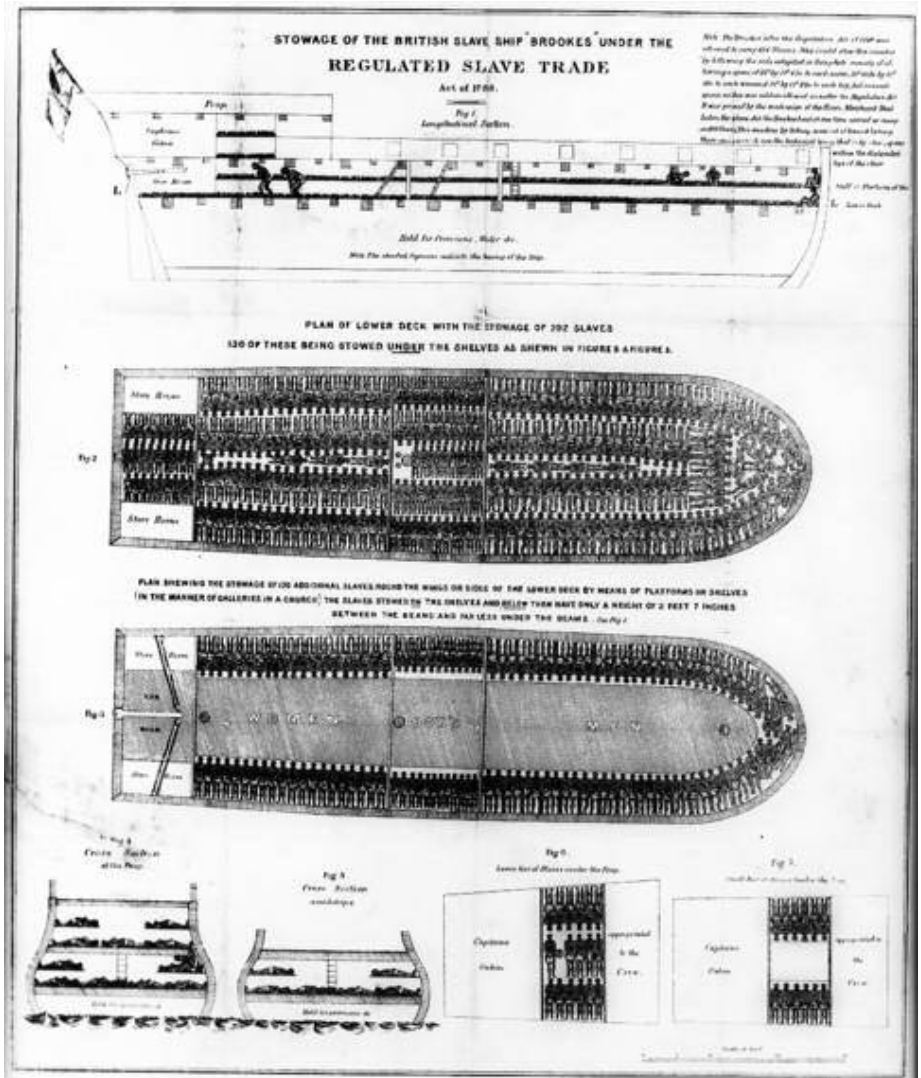


Fig. 2: Stowage of the British Slave Ship "Brookes" under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788 (c. 1788)

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